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ABSTRACT

The situation card used in the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages/Educational Testing Service (ACTFL/ETS) Oral Proficiency Interview provides a kind of linguistic-topographical map of the student's foreign language ability by measuring what the student of business Spanish is able or unable to do in business situations in that language. The situation card can reveal the particulars of grammar, vocabulary, and fluency on which the student still needs work. A pool of business Spanish situation cards can be adapted to reflect and enhance any aspect of course content and reinforce target vocabulary. The cards also provide spontaneity that develops a realistic student flexibility. The situations seem to be most effective when they are presented in English so that students do not misunderstand the directions and so that key vocabulary words and phrases are not revealed. Cards can be used regularly, perhaps at the end of each class session. Individual performances should be tape-recorded for student review. A selection of situation cards adapted from the ACTFL/ETS model are presented, and the procedure for their use is reviewed. The situations are designed for three proficiency levels (intermediate, advanced, and superior) and contain a variety of scenario types and topics. (MSE)

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BUSINESS SPANISH: ROLE PLAYING FOR ORAL PROFICIENCY

by

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Business Spanish: Role Playing for Oral Proficiency

Professor Kenneth Chastain at the University of Virginia used to impress upon his students of Spanish that "You only learn to do what you do." If one wanted to learn how to understand, speak, read and write Spanish, then there was no effective substitute for actually engaging in those language-learning activities. The learning was in the doing. If we apply this important pedagogical notion to those who would learn to speak Spanish (or any other foreign language) for business purposes, the key to effective learning would be that they practice using the language in the target contexts: the survival, social and professional/technical situations one encounters or is liable to encounter in one form or another in the Spanish-speaking or bilingual business world. One effective way to help prepare students of Business Spanish for successful and confident performance in the real world is to borrow a device implemented and formalized by the ACTFL-ETS oral proficiency interview model--the situation card.

In the oral proficiency interview model the situation card "encourages speech production in a real-life situation" and it "is flexible. It can be made very simple or relatively complex, depending on the level of the candidate" (ETS, 88). For the student of Business Spanish (or of any other target language for business needs), the situation card can help to measure what he or she is able or unable to do in business situations in that language. As a result, the model provides the student with its distinctive linguistic-topographic map (peaks and valleys, floors and ceilings) which indicates the student's "ability to function in specified contexts with

suitable content and accuracy" (ETS, 21). The linguistic-topographic map, which can be produced visually from the student's tape-recorded performance, specifies the particulars of grammar, vocabulary and fluency that the student still needs to work on, as opposed to any vague recommendations that improvement is needed in one or more of these areas (i.e., that the student simply needs to work on his fluency).

Within the formalized functional trisection (context, function, accuracy) of the oral proficiency interview model, the context I am interested in is that of business. And within this broad arena called business, the situation cards will specify more discrete subcontexts related to various areas and situations associated with doing or talking about business. The cards will be used with students at the Intermediate, Advanced and Superior levels. At the Intermediate level, in keeping with the parameters prescribed by the oral proficiency model, the student should be tested by the situation card on how well he can negotiate a (business) scenario in the present tense where the role play will require that he create sentences and ask questions. At the Advanced level the present tense ideally will be expanded to include the past and/or future tenses, and individual sentences will be combined into paragraphs which demonstrate the student's ability to narrate or describe in detail. At this level the scenario adds a complication to the role play. At the Superior level the ability to hypothesize (the conditional, the subjunctive) is included, and the scenario should test the student's ability to support an opinion with a broad, appropriate use of vocabulary, register and tone (language tailored "to suit the audience," ETS, Appendix VIII, 34) without any pattern of errors.

Under the general parameters of the oral proficiency interview model

summarized above, a pool of Business Spanish situation cards can be adapted to reflect and enhance any aspect of the course content, from Accounting to Finance to Real Estate, from hiring and firing to sales and promotion. The cards serve to reinforce the target vocabulary of the different fields of business being taught, and the scenarios they can suggest are a reminder that the specialized terminology introduced in a text in class is also used in the real world of people doing business face to face or over the phone. The cards also provide an element of spontaneity that requires and develops a certain flexibility on the part of the student since, as in real life, he or she does not necessarily have complete control over the direction or outcome of the situation, nor perhaps of the language of the situation (where flexibility is demonstrated by the ability to circumlocute). Since I am interested in having my students rehearse for types of situations that do occur in the real world of business, I try to make the range of the card scenarios broad enough to include variations of predictable survival, social and professional/technical situations.

In order to maximize the benefits of using the situation card in a Business Spanish class, my own experience has led me to agree with the ETS's "Note on Situations" (91) which prescribes that "It is usually more efficient to present the situations in English, since the tester does not risk giving away vocabulary or constructions" in the target language. The cards can be used on a regular basis, perhaps for six to ten minutes at the end of each class or every other class. This allows the students to become familiar and comfortable with the card routine, and it also provides them with what (ideally) evolves into an anticipated, relaxed, spontaneous and fun way of reinforcing the material they are learning. The individual's performance in a given scenario in class should be tape-recorded so that he

can review and assess his own effectiveness in terms of context, function and accuracy. It is very useful to make two copies of the tape. One I keep, the other is given to the student who will "grade" is own performance at home. The student then comes by my office and we replay the tape together while we conduct a running commentary on what we hear, using the pause button to enable us to criticize in a timely manner weaknesses in content, vocabulary, and grammatical expression, as well as accent and style. Generally it is better to cover only as many as two levels of a situation--either Intermediate to Advanced, or Advanced to Superior. To try and run the situation from Intermediate through Superior is too time consuming, which results in lost interest and effectiveness. It is also beneficial to use realia as a prop for the situation card in an attempt to match as closely as possible what the scenario would entail in the real world. If the scenario is about a phone purchase, then bring real telephones into class for the students to use rather than have them imagine or make believe that they are on the phone.

The following are examples of situation cards or situation card formats that I have used and intend to develop for further use in courses on Business Spanish. The first three scenarios (travel, lodging, dining) are ACTFL-ETS situation cards that have been modified slightly such that the context applies to business. The second group of scenarios (hiring, business organization in the United States, purchasing, advertising) represents an adaptation of the ACTFL-ETS model to more specific business themes and situations. The procedure is that in class a card is handed to a student who then reads the description of the scenario out loud in English. The scenario is then acted out in Spanish (or the target language). Initially the student's counterpart (helper or adversary) is played by the

professor. Later this may be done also by another student so that as many students as possible are involved in the exercise. After the opening scenario (either Intermediate or Advanced level) is completed, the first student may either continue with the next, more difficult level of the situation (Advanced or Superior) or he may delegate his role to another student, again involving more learners in the drill. The same scenario, such as a business trip to Barcelona, can be enacted at the Intermediate, Advanced or Superior levels, with each higher level demanding more from the student in terms of context, function and accuracy. The crucial role of the counterpart is to challenge the student at each level so that what he is able to do in the language in a given business situation is confirmed and what he cannot do is made equally clear as an area in which further work is required. By studying his own performance on tape, the student is in an excellent position to measurably improve his oral proficiency in Spanish in a situation type drawn from the real world of business.

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TRAVEL

Intermediate level

You have to make a business trip to Barcelona. Call a travel agent and ask:

1. The best mode of transportation.
2. How long it takes.
3. How much it costs.
4. When you can depart.

Book flight 1866 and ask the agent the best way to get to the airport.

Advanced level

You got held up in traffic and missed your flight. At the airport ticket counter:

1. Explain that you left home early enough to reach the airport but... Describe some of your effort to arrive on time.
2. Ask about other departures.
3. Argue that tomorrow will be too late for your business meeting.
4. Agree to wait and see what happens as a standby passenger on the last flight of the day, Number 1723.

Superior level

You are finally on board your flight from Málaga to Barcelona. Strike up a conversation with the passenger next to you. Ask if he travels often and what mode of transportation he prefers. State and justify your own preference for air travel, despite the hassles of missing a flight yesterday.

LODGING.

Intermediate level

You are checking into a hotel. Ask about:

1. The price of a single room, preferably on the top floor away from traffic noise.
2. Corporate discount rates.
3. Paying for the room with a credit card.
4. Check-out time.
5. Having a suit dry-cleaned.

Advanced level

Call the hotel switchboard. Inform them that:

1. There are no towels or wash cloths.
2. The light bulb over the desk is burned out and you need it replaced so you can work on a sales report.
3. You will need a wake-up call at 7:10 a.m.

Ask if anybody has left any messages. You were expecting some clients to call earlier. Tell them that if anybody calls, you will be in the dining room.

Superior level

You are talking to a fellow salesperson about the woes of business travel. Comment on a recent bad experience you had with lodging at a medium-priced hotel. Go into detail about some of the things that went wrong. Argue that the only way to travel is first class and that the extra cost of lodging is justifiable in terms of employee satisfaction.

DINING.

Intermediate level

You will be taking an important client out to dinner at an expensive restaurant.

1. Call and make reservations (table for five under the name González).
2. Ask for a quiet table near the back patio on the second floor.
3. Make the reservation for an appropriate hour (will vary according to country).
4. Confirm that there is a dress code and ask about parking.

Advanced level

You are at an expensive restaurant with an important client from Mexico.

1. Ask your guest how his travel was earlier that day (good flight, etc.).
2. Ask how his family is doing (wife and children whom you met last year).
3. Ask if he received the documents and receipts you sent him. Detail what they were about.
4. Ask if your guest has enjoyed his meal (specify what he ordered) and suggest the dessert for which the establishment is famous.

Superior level

You are trying to have a conversation with an important client in an expensive restaurant. You had requested a quiet table so that you would be able to talk about a business deal. The table next to you is celebrating a retirement party. It is becoming loud and offensive. You have already asked the manager for help, but he has done nothing. Excuse yourself for a moment and address the increasingly boisterous group next to you. Convince them to change their behavior.

HIRING.

Intermediate level

You call an employment agency.

1. Explain that you need a bilingual salesperson.
2. You want someone with experience and references.
3. The person must know the city well.
4. He or she must also be willing to travel.

Advanced level

An employment agency has sent you a person in answer to your ad for a bilingual salesperson.

1. Ask how she found out about the job.
2. Ask about her previous work experience and references.
3. Ask why she left the company where she was working before.
4. Describe what the position will involve: travel, long hours, a variety of products.

Superior level

You are about to hire a bilingual salesperson.

1. Negotiate the salary of this new employee.
2. Describe the commissions, perks, and bonuses.
3. Explain your employee benefits program.
4. Summarize your sales goals for the coming year.
5. Favorably compare your products to those of your top competitor and support your belief that yours are superior.

BUSINESS ORGANIZATION IN THE U.S.A.

Intermediate level

A visitor asks you about the forms of business organization in the United States. You answer that:

1. There are public and private enterprises.
2. There are profit and non-profit organizations.
3. There are, generally speaking, sole proprietorships, partnerships, and corporations.

Advanced level

Your visitor from _____ would like to know more about how businesses are organized in the United States. Explain how:

1. A sole proprietorship functions.
2. A partnership functions.
3. A corporation functions.

Ask if your visitor will be available tomorrow for a tour of your company. Arrange for the visit.

Superior level

Your visitor from _____ has some reservations about the way business is done in the United States. He sees capitalism and free enterprise as exploitative and outdated. Diplomatically defend the notions of capitalism and free markets, as opposed to other more controlled economies.

PURCHASING.

Intermediate level

You are on the phone with an office supply wholesaler.

1. Place an order for five or six items (Paper clips, staples, typewriter ribbons, correcting fluid, etc.).
2. It is Monday. Have the order delivered by 10 a.m. Wednesday.
3. Have the order billed to your account.

Advanced level

You are still on the phone with the office supply wholesaler.

1. Order the adding machine, electric typewriter, and dictating machines you need by 10 a.m. Wednesday.
2. Ask about ordering business cards. Describe what you want on the cards and place your order.
3. Ask if the computer parts you ordered last week have arrived. Try and get a firm estimate of when they will arrive.

Superior level

Your office supply order has just been delivered COD. Call the wholesaler to complain that you wanted to charge the order to your account. Also, part of what you ordered did not arrive and some of the items delivered were incorrect (the typewriter ribbons do not match the typewriters, etc.). Have the wholesaler provide an immediate solution to the problems. Remind him that this is not the first time this has happened.

ADVERTISING.

Intermediate level

You call a magazine to speak to the Advertising Sales Manager.

1. Inform him or her that you want to purchase space to advertise your new product for the next six weekly issues.
2. Ask for the rates (1/4-page, 1/2-page, full-page ads).
3. Make an appointment to meet next Tuesday in order to discuss the matter further.

Advanced level

You are meeting with the Advertising Sales Manager of a magazine.

1. Confirm the prices quoted to you over the phone last week.
2. Describe your new product and an advertising layout you had in mind.
3. Ask how many readers will see the ad and what impact it can be expected to have on sales.
4. Ask about methods of payment for the ad.

Superior level

You have taken out a full-page ad for your new product in an expensive magazine. You are disappointed with the design and layout (you thought it would appear near the front, which you had agreed on verbally). You have also overheard friends and colleagues criticizing the ad. Sales have dropped rather than increased. Demand an explanation from the Advertising Sales manager and suggest solutions to the problem.

In conclusion, situation cards can be adapted to any expected (a forthcoming business trip) or potential scenario in the world of business. The cards help students of Business Spanish to build verbal mastery and confidence by providing them training for negotiating their way through topics or situations for which they have been equipped in class only grammatically and lexically. At the same time, the cards help to indicate the real functional level of general and discrete (more specialized terminology) Business Spanish proficiency. Ultimately, role playing for oral proficiency can help to provide measurable linguistic (and cultural) practice and preparation for the real world of doing business in Spanish or any other target language. This can only be good for American business as the United States begins to act on its growing awareness that the best language for doing business is the language of the client.

WORKS CITED

ETS Oral Proficiency Testing Manual. Princeton, New Jersey: Educational Testing Service, 1982.